

老鼠嫁女

The Mouse Marriage

Bridging Language and Culture: a Thematic Unit Based On a Chinese Folktale

INTRODUCTION

Traditional folktales constitute a social institution that reflects the value, customs, and lifestyles of the culture and are a natural way for students to explore the historical past, the belief systems of varied societies, and diverse factual information (Collingwood, 2005). Bosma (1993) states that young children easily accept the folktale as symbolic interpretation of life in an imaginary land and they can also be guided toward recognizing the distinctive traits of other cultures by reflecting on specific characteristics of the tales as retold within those cultures. Roney (1993) makes the even stronger claim that by using folktales, students can interact with culture (past and present) and make sense of the world around them. A carefully selected folktale can be a powerful tool to bring culture to our foreign language classroom, as well as serve as the center of a thematic unit.

Utilizing the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (2006), I developed a thematic unit for the teaching of Mandarin Chinese based on a traditional Chinese folktale -- 老鼠嫁女 (lǎo shǔ jià nǚ, The Mouse Bride/The Mouse Marriage). This unit for elementary school students incorporates the arts, social studies and language arts, as well as culturally appropriate communicative activities. The third grade class, located in the Midwest, met for two 25 minutes classes a week for eight weeks. All of the 25 participating students were English speakers who had no prior Chinese language learning experience. Even with limited teaching time (a total of less than eight hours), the students were able to perform the folktale in Chinese to their parents and the community as a final performance assessment.

SELECTING THE FOLKTALE

A pair of mouse parents seeks the most powerful husband for their daughter and interprets this to mean that their daughter should marry whomever or whatever they most fear. First, they choose the Sun, but the Sun says that he fears the Dark Cloud. The Dark Cloud says that he fears the Wind, and the Wind says he fears the Wall (which blocks his way), and the Wall fears the Mouse (which digs a hole under it and makes the wall fall). Ultimately, the mouse parents decide to marry their daughter to the handsome young mouse. The wedding was prepared, and on the wedding day, the new couple knelt and bowed to the mouse parents. The bride sat on a sedan chair and left her parents for her new home.

From the language learning perspective, the essential language -- vocabulary and structure involved in this mouse story matches the students' learning levels. Pictures or simple dramatization introduce the vocabulary of family members and concepts from nature such as the Sun and the Dark Cloud. Additionally, since the story actions

are repetitive with regularly occurring patterns, the meaning of the story is easy to comprehend and students can soon predict what will happen, enhancing comprehension. By reducing the text into a short count-out rhyme with a clear predictable story sequence (Appendix A) we have made the story more accessible to beginning students. In most sentences, the differentiation between the meanings of the rhyming words in the story rhyme is key to understanding the characters and events in the folktale.

The Mouse Marriage story is a culturally rich folktale that bridges the relationships among cultural products, practices and perspectives. A myriad of common symbols for luck in traditional Chinese culture, which are used at weddings and at the New Year, are defined in the folktale. Using book illustrations or paper cuttings, a traditional form of folk art in many regions in Northern China and one that has many examples of the Mouse Marriage, we can see auspicious words (福 fú, good fortune; 喜喜 shuāng xǐ, double happiness), lucky symbols such as the red lantern, flowers, fruit, etc.

This story introduces students to additional cultural products such as costumes, wedding sedan chairs, traditional musical instruments, wedding music and other elements involved in weddings. The story also illustrates various traditions (body gestures, manners, and customs) and perspectives. Traditional Chinese culture is based on agriculture and the mouse is a natural enemy of farming because of its love of grain. This folktale represents the wish to eliminate the mice by marrying Miss Mouse and moving her to far off place. At the same time, since mice are prolific breeders, Chinese people use the image of the Mouse Marriage to wish young married couples to have many children and a flourishing family.

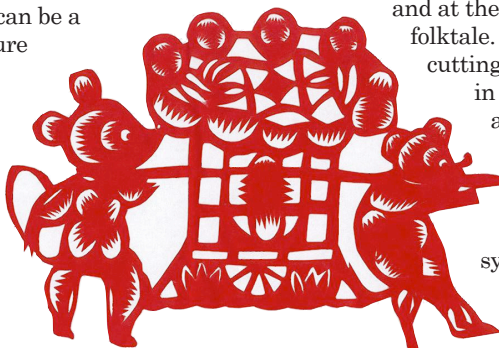
As with many folktales the mouse marriage story has several variants. For this thematic unit we selected the version in Monica Chang's book *The Mouse Bride – A Chinese Folktale* (1994) but altered the ending to have a happier resolution. Instead of being eaten by the cat groom, Miss Mouse marries a brave and strong mouse and they live together happily ever after. This ending is more acceptable for young learners. Zipes (1999) advocated this change stating that the altered tale "shifted the emphasis more toward the civilization" and reproduces and continues the progress of the world "toward perfect happiness" (p.8).

PROCEDURES OF THE THEMATIC UNIT OF WORK

The objectives are centered on communication, culture and subject content connections. The teaching content clusters were developed first, and then were further developed into 16 lessons.

Cultural Objectives:

- Identify different forms of cultural expression, such as finger signs for numbers, traditional Chinese salutes 作揖 (zuō yī) for men, 道万



福 (dào wàn fú) for women and 磕头 (kē tóu, kowtow) (Standard 4.2);

- Demonstrate awareness of similarities and differences between Chinese culture and their own cultures (wedding customs, festivals). (Standard 4.2);
- Compare and contrast intangible products of Chinese culture such as games, rhymes and folktales with similar products of their own culture. ("Hickory Dickory Dock" with "little mouse climbs the lamp stand") (Standard 4.2);
- *Demonstrate familiarity with Chinese symbolism of colors, animals, numbers and other items. (Standard 2.2);
- Identify, talk about, and produce artwork, crafts, and games enjoyed by their Chinese peers (e.g. paper cutting character 喜喜, which means "double happiness"). (Standard 2.1).

Teaching Clusters:

The first four clusters (below) were the pre-teaching stage; clusters five and six were the story-reading and story-telling stage; and clusters eight and nine were the post-reading and telling stage. Cluster seven was the "big C" culture – historical figures, literature, music, and fine art which flowed throughout the thematic unit (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004, p. 225).

Pre-teaching strategies

- Counting people and animals.
- Family vocabulary (the mouse family in the tale and students' own family).
- Mouse (body parts; adjectives-colors and other relevant describing words). This part was not included in the 16 teaching lessons.
- Who is stronger/better? (The Sun? The Clouds? The Wind? The tall Wall? The Mouse?).

Storytelling and story reading phase

Telling the story: using a flannel board and cutouts, paper cutting set, and students made a Big Book.

Post telling/reading phase

- Students make a big book
- Students work in groups to illustrate one page of the story written on sentence strips. The whole class produces a story book used to re-read the story during the following classes.
- Culture and History: The content is divided and merged into other clusters (English explanations are used).
- Cultural practices: Chinese people celebrate the happy event in the Mouse family during the Chinese New Year period.
- Cultural products: Folktale and various crafts that represent this story; musical instruments and wedding music, Chinese costumes.
- Cultural perspectives: Good wishes for the harvest and a flourishing family
- Digital storytelling: Due to the limited teaching time, it was not possible to carry out this part of the experience. The students' voices, however, were recorded and imported into the previously created digital story. If teaching time permits, and with assistance from the classroom teacher or a technology assistant, students could create their own digital version of this folktale.
- Prepare and present a play to parents and the community.

Teaching Strategies

Designed to introduce Chinese to beginning young learners, the activities and strategies focus at the word and sentence level. Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) clarify that "It is possible that even at the word and sentence levels the students are able to communicate meaning" (p. 92). Cultural and subject elements were considered as well as the students' age and learning level when designing the activities. The following were the key ideas used in planning the thematic unit:

- Use etymological information to input Chinese characters. Introduce Chinese characters from the first lesson with the following introduction procedure: Introduce a selection of the most common radicals to establish a basic concept of characters. Select characters related to the story and have a pictographic origin (one of the methods of Chinese character formation). Characters in this category consist of ancient forms iconically representing concrete objects. e.g. 高 (gāo, tall), is a pictograph of a high tower or pavilion on a lofty sub-structure equipped with a hall. 比 (bǐ, compare), represents two men standing as if to compare heights (Peng, 1983). Present each character with both a picture representing it and the actual character. Create a flashcard with a picture to provide a formation cue of the character on one side and on the other side, the actual word.
- Total Physical Response (TPR): The teacher calls out a counting number, students respond physically with the appropriate finger signs. This activity can be completed with either as a pair or whole class activity students.
- Sudoku: Practice math Sudoku to reinforce reading Chinese numbers.
- Chant and Rhythm: Introduce the number chant and practice it with a clear beat by
- clapping hands and playing the cymbals. Repeating the similar/same sounds at the end of each sentence, provides students the opportunity to distinguish the key sounds while they are actively engaged in verbal practice. The beat for the chant is the same as the story rhyme.
- The familiar beat, learned from previous lessons, enables students to learn the rhyme.
- Gouin series: Teach reading the story by telling it in a memorable pattern in a
- simplified rhyme with less than ten sentences. (...The Cloud is better than the Sun, The Wind is better than the Cloud...)
- "Stick beats the tiger": This is a Chinese version of the "Rock, Paper, and scissors" and helps students practice speaking and listening skills (The Cloud beats the Sun, the Wind beats the Cloud...).
- "Pass the flower, beat the drum": A popular cultural game to help students practice
- introducing themselves to the class.
- Snap: Students play this game in groups, picking up the required Chinese character card.
- Matching: In this formative assessment students match pictures with characters and sentence strips with pictures from the story.

DRAMATIZE THE FOLKTALE: THE FINAL PRODUCTION

Many educators see dramatic play, literacy, and other language skill development as complexly intertwined. Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) indicate that performance is a powerful motivator for accuracy and attention. Stern (1983) notes that dramatizing communicative events leads to the necessary bodily and emotional involvement, which results in the motivation to make meanings and intentions clear in the target language. As an extended speaking activity and a communicative strategy to help the students improve their communicative competence, the story worked well as a play



performed first to their peer classes and then to the parents, the principal and other school community members.

Inspired to follow the traditions of the Peking Opera in terms of the performance and stage props, I shared with the students some traditional opera customs and props and incorporated them into the performance. These customs included some of the traditional Chinese salutes: 作揖 (zuō yī), 道万福 (dào wàn) and 磕头 (kē tóu). Peking Opera is a highly stylized performance closely connected with the history, customs, culture, and social conditions of China. In traditional opera, for example, two pieces of cloths carried by two men represent a sedan chair, and one table covered with a red cloth with two chairs beside it makes a stage. Those ideas of stage props were all adapted to the students' final dramatic performance. The stage was decorated with a red lantern, red candles, which were not lighted, and a red background. All of the girls and some of the boys wore traditional Chinese costumes while traditional Chinese wedding music bookended the play. The students used as props: a pipe for smoking for the Mouse Father, a silk handkerchief for the Mouse Mother and Miss Mouse, a paper cutting of the character 喜喜(double happiness), Chinese calligraphy (the name of the play 老鼠嫁女 displayed on the stage), a wedding sedan chair, firecrackers, a shoulder pole and baskets, a red flower knot for the groom, a red head cover for the bride and traditional musical instruments. All those cultural elements in the performance helped to create a context or frame in ways appropriate in the target culture.

The final play was a culminating performance task that "pulls together the goals of the unit and guides all the other planning choices that have to be made" (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2004). As students acted and reenacted the whole story, I could see them begin to demonstrate comprehension of many otherwise unfamiliar language and cultural elements. I could see that the story came to life and that students were imaginatively engaged. In the students' minds, they are on stage and they see the scene through a make-believe vision. They become the characters they portray, and they have entered the story world and have lived the characters lives.

CONCLUSION

This work is an example of how to develop a thematic unit for young learners that has a traditional folktale as its center. Age appropriate folktales can be a good resource for teaching foreign languages, providing an engaging and meaningful language learning context as well as rich cultural content. The folktale's versatility as a teaching tool permits the integration of foreign language instruction across many content areas. Met and Rhodes (1990) point out that "authentic, developmentally appropriate, culturally rich, content-based materials" are key components in quality elementary-school foreign language programs (p. 436). The folktale The Mouse Marriage has made a good unit focus. Along with cultural elements involved in the story, the story's well-known plot line helped to make the meaning comprehensible, especially since it was richly supported with visuals, gestures, and student participation. To some students, this story is not finished. One student drew a picture that was titled "Mrs. Mouse's new house". Couldn't we continue the language and cultural input by using the student's created mouse story in "Part Two"?

Appendix A: The Mouse Marriage Text

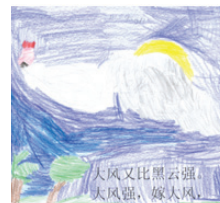
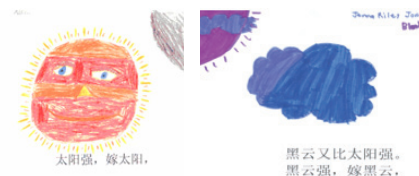
老鼠嫁女 The Mouse Marriage

老鼠爸，老鼠妈，老鼠女儿要出嫁。 Mouse Daddy, Mouse Mommy,
Miss Mouse is going to get married.

太阳强，嫁太阳， The Sun is powerful, so marry him,
黑云又比太阳强。 Dark Cloud is more powerful than the Sun.
黑云强，嫁黑云， The Dark Cloud is powerful, so marry him,
大风又比黑云强。 The Wind is more powerful than the Dark Cloud.

大风强，嫁大风，
高墙又比大风强。
高墙强，嫁高墙，
老鼠又比高墙强。
谢谢爸，谢谢妈，
吹~吹~打~打，
老鼠女儿出了嫁。

The Wind is powerful, so marry him,
Tall Wall is more powerful than the Wind.
The Tall wall is powerful, so marry him,
Mouse is more powerful than the Tall Wall.
Thank Daddy, Thank Mommy,
Piping and drumming,
The Miss Mouse is being married off.



Appendix B: Student Created Story Book – The Mouse Marriage

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